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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IMPLICATIONS OF REARMING GEORGIA FOR U.S.-RUSSIAN
"RESET"

REF: A. MOSCOW 1225
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 0840

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle: Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A decision to move towards a more robust military relationship with Georgia will imperil our efforts to re-start relations with Russia, if it is not carefully calibrated and deployed. While Medvedev understands the strategic and personal benefits of crafting a productive partnership with the U.S., this impulse is trumped by the GOR's "absolute" priority placed on expanding Russian influence in the Eurasian neighborhood, preventing NATO enlargement, and demonstrating Russia's great power status. The Russian political class and populace is united behind these principles, with the August war confirming for the leadership that the international community lacks the levers to coerce a change in Russian behavior. Russian criticism of PFP exercises was both sincere -- anger over the "business as usual" approach with Saakashvili -- and tactical, designed to raise the costs of CIS cooperation with the West, but was not matched by a change in military posture. However, given consistent warnings over the consequences of weapons sales to Georgia, we believe a lethal military supply relationship with Tbilisi would come at the cost of advancing Georgia's territorial integrity, and could lessen Russian restraint on weapons transfers to Iran. We believe that keeping the focus on Georgia's economic and democratic development, while continuing our military cooperation with Tbilisi through transparent PFP programming with European partners, and non-lethal bilateral mil-mil training and assistance, is the only viable -- if very long-term -- strategy to induce better Russian behavior and restore Georgian territorial integrity. Critical to this effort will be building ballast in a U.S.-Russian relationship that serves as a break on Russia's worst instincts. End Summary

Showdown Over Georgia?

[1](#)2. (C) If not carefully calibrated and deployed, a decision to move towards a more robust military relationship with Georgia has the very real potential to trigger a dispute on a set of issues that are both neuralgic and strategic for the Russian political and military establishment, endangering the Administration's effort to undertake a fresh start with Moscow. While Medvedev appears seized with taking charge of the U.S.-Russian account and placing it on a new footing during the July summit, this policy impulse will be subordinate to Russia's "strategic interests" in its Eurasian neighborhood, as defined by both Medvedev and Putin. Russian intransigence on the UNOMIG rollover is a conspicuous illustration of this. We cannot accept this Russian calculus, but we need to understand what drives the Kremlin and White House:

-- Russia places an "absolute" priority on expanding its influence and deepening its integration with neighboring

states, as part of a self-conscious policy to combat the West's "creep" towards its borders (ref a). Inevitably, the question of Russia's status in the Eurasian "neighborhood," and the presumed zero-sum competition for influence along Russia's borders, will remain our most contentious bilateral issue and the likeliest stumbling block to improved U.S.-Russian relations.

-- Russia opposes any further enlargement of NATO. The August war in Georgia signaled Moscow's readiness to expend materiel and men to achieve this goal, even at the cost of international opprobrium. The fact that NATO membership for both Georgia and Ukraine is not a front burner priority has not tempered Moscow's stance, since the Russian leadership sees this as a temporary reprieve, brought about by European reservations and not by a change in policy by the Obama Administration.

-- Absent a standstill agreement on NATO, which Medvedev hopes to achieve through discussions over a new European Security Treaty, Russia presumes that we seek its strategic neutering. Our principled rejection of a Russian sphere of influence is read here as a denial of Russia's status as a great power, and another example of U.S. "double standards," rather than a repudiation of a Warsaw Pact mentality.

-- Russia judges that we lack the bilateral or multilateral levers to coerce it into moderating its stance on Georgia or reversing its recognition of the conflict territories. Moscow assumes that we have too many strategic interests in common to credibly threaten Russia with a cut-off in relations -- a move that Europe (both old and new) never

MOSCOW 00001591 002 OF 003

seriously contemplated in the wake of the Georgian war.

-- Russian leaders enjoy a policy carte blanche on Georgia, with respect to domestic public opinion. Polls consistently show that Russians overwhelmingly welcome Moscow's resurgent foreign policy, revile Saakashvili, and blame Euro-Atlantic institutions for Moscow's worsening relations with former republics and Warsaw Pact partners. There is absolutely no difference between Medvedev and Putin when it comes to Georgia.

Russian Warnings Over Mil-Mil Relations

13. (C) Russia has used the previously scheduled Cooperative Longbow/Cooperative Lancer PFP exercises and U.S./NATO discussions of Georgian military reform to hint at a political price tag for continued cultivation of Georgia as a NATO aspirant. While Russian Ambassador to NATO Rogozin's characterization of the exercises as "an absurdity and madness" were discounted in NATO circles, he accurately channeled Moscow's anger over what was seen as a "business as usual" policy towards Saakashvili, as well as Moscow's strategy of raising the potential costs of participation by other CIS states. Medvedev labeled the exercises "muscle-flexing," an "outright provocation," and "a mistaken and dangerous decision," while Putin questioned the "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations, pointing to the exercises as a "signal in a different direction." Even mild-mannered DFM Ryabkov fulminated publicly against the "cheap and unconvincing arguments" used to justify PFP. Pro-Kremlin and opposition politicians emphasized that a "return to last August" or a "new Cold War" might flow from a continued NATO embrace of Tbilisi. Despite the harsh rhetoric, however, Russia did not place its troops on alert during the exercises, which proceeded smoothly.

14. (C) When it comes to weapons sales to Tbilisi, Russian actions have been harsher. For those few Russian officials willing to believe that the U.S. did not directly goad Georgia into attacking, it is an article of faith that Georgia's military relationship with the U.S. triggered Saakashvili's fateful miscalculation on August 8. While

accusing Georgia of 30-fold increases in military spending (at 7-8 percent of GDP), in addition to illicit purchases from Ukrainian and Israeli middlemen, and an overconfidence spawned by U.S. assurances of support, the GOR called for an arms embargo against Georgia in the war's aftermath. Invoking OSCE and UN conventions against the provision of offensive weapons to conflict zones, Medvedev then promulgated a January presidential decree allowing for unilateral sanctions against countries that assist Tbilisi in its "remilitarization." Both Medvedev and Putin appear to believe that the U.S. already has supplied Tbilisi surreptitiously with arms, which illustrates the invidious role, as well as dominance, of the security services in running Russian policy in the Caucasus.

A Better Focus: Economy, CBMS, and PfP

15. (C) From our perspective, the challenge is to demonstrate that the U.S. will protect its legitimate interests in the Caucasus -- including support for Georgian sovereignty, territorial integrity and the democratically elected government of Georgia -- without triggering a tit-for-tat military escalation that we cannot win, but that Georgia can surely lose. From our vantage point, a burgeoning military supply relationship with Georgia is more of a liability for Georgia than a benefit. It would do nothing to secure a long-term resolution of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, allowing Russia to "justify" its military buildup in the conflict territories, increasing the insecurities of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian populations already distrustful of Saakashvili, and driving the separatist leaders further into Moscow's arms. It would almost certainly raise the temperature, rather than maintaining the unsatisfactory status quo long enough for economic development and confidence-building measures to chip away at the current hostile standoff. The ramifications of a policy clash on weapons sales could also be felt elsewhere, with Moscow seizing a pretext to move forward on the delivery of S-300s to Iran.

16. (C) As we have argued separately (ref b), the U.S. will be most effective in countering Russian actions by acting in concert with Europe to help Georgia demonstrate to the Abkhaz and South Ossetians that autonomy with Tbilisi is better than submission to Russia. Russian corruption, heavy-handedness and reliance on criminalized local leaders ultimately will

MOSCOW 00001591 003 OF 003

play to Georgia's advantage. While Georgia cannot reconquer its lost territory by force, it can establish itself as a democratically vibrant and economically successful model for the region. By keeping the international focus on economic assistance to Tbilisi and on creating credible international monitoring regimes, we can create the time and space to intensify cooperation with Russia in other areas of strategic interest, adding ballast to the U.S.-Russian relationship that could make Moscow think twice about exacerbating tensions in the Caucasus.

17. (C) This is not to say that the U.S. should be constrained in providing bilateral non-lethal military assistance, training, or other equipment clearly directed at assisting Georgia's basic requirements to control its borders, maintain law and order and counter terrorism. In addition, we believe that PfP exercises and programs should be pursued as part of the standard NATO toolbox for cooperation with non-member states, notwithstanding Russian rhetorical umbrage. The value of building Georgian capacity for international peacekeeping, counter-narcotics, civil-military emergency preparedness, and anti-terrorism operations is obvious. PfP has the advantage of greater transparency and reinforcing a common U.S.-European approach to Georgia; conceivably, when relations stabilize, Russia could be included as an observer. While Russian forces will remain concentrated in the neighboring territories for the

near-term, our goal of securing a Russian drawdown and then departure will not be accomplished through a U.S. military sales relationship or lethal training program. Instead, we should hold Medvedev accountable to the principles of his European Security Treaty initiative, which are based on respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Comment: U.S.-Russia Relations Matter

18. (C) We in no way accede to Russian redlines by acknowledging that Georgia could never win a military confrontation with Russia, and should not be encouraged to pursue a strategy that focuses on military force as the underpinning to a stronger, more stable country. We recognize that our suggested approach would be deeply dissatisfying to Saakashvili, but we see no short-term fix to the generational estrangement triggered by the August war and no way to neutralize the advantages of geography, size, and capabilities enjoyed by Russia. Instead, consistent and coordinated initiatives by the U.S. and Europe to assist Georgia, implement monitoring regimes, and persuade Russia to engage credibly will be better advanced in an environment where the U.S. and Russia are not in a hostile standoff. Our assessment is that if we say "yes" to a significant military relationship with Tbilisi, Russia will say "no" to any medium-term diminution in tensions, and feel less constrained absent reverting to more active opposition to critical U.S. strategic interests.

BEYRLE